

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03

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R 041330Z SEP 76

FM AMEMBASSY PORT OF SPAIN

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9664

INFO AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN

AMEMBASSY CARACAS

AMEMBASSY GEORGETOWN

AMEMBASSY KINGSTON

AMEMBASSY PARAMARIBO

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 1 OF 2 PORT OF SPAIN 2275

E.O. 11652: NA

TAGS: PINT, TD

SUBJECT: TRINIDAD ON THE EVE OF ELECTIONS

REF: PORT OF SPAIN 2235

BEGIN SUMMARY

AFTER MANY MONTHS OF ANTICIPATION AND ACTIVITY, TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO IS AT LAST ON THE VERGE OF HOLDING GENERAL ELECTIONS. THE LONG PERIOD OF WAITING HAS PRODUCED A PLETHORA OF PARTIES AND CANDIDATES BUT NO CLEAR ALTERNATIVE TO THE PEOPLE'S NATIONAL MOVEMENT (PNM) AND PRIME MINISTER ERIC WILLIAMS WHICH HAVE GOVERNED THE COUNTRY FOR THE PAST TWENTY YEARS. TRINIDADIAN'S SEEM UNLIKELY TO JEOPARDIZE THE RELATIVE STABILITY AND PROSPERITY THEY HAVE ENJOYED OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES BY OPTING FOR ONE OF THE MANY UNTRIED SOLUTIONS OFFERED BY THE OPPOSITION. THE PNM WILL PROBABLY WIN A COMFORTABLE MAJORITY IN PARLIAMENT BUT SHOULD FACE A MUCH MORE VIGOROUS OPPOSITION THERE.

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END SUMMARY.

1. A RECORD 271 CANDIDATES REPRESENTING NINE POLITICAL PARTIES FILED THEIR NOMINATION PAPERS ON AUGUST 30 TO CONTEST THE ELECTIONS FOR THE 36 SEATS IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES. THUS, ONLY TEN DAYS BEFORE THE ACTUAL ELECTION, THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO IS AS CONFUSED AS EVER. VOTERS WHO HAD HOPED THAT THE NOMINATION PROCESS AND THE TT\$250 DEPOSIT WOULD REDUCE THE FIELD TO A MORE MANAGEABLE LEVEL WERE DISAPPOINTED. THE CHIEF BENEFICIARIES OF THE CONFUSION OF PARTIES WILL UNDOUBTEDLY BE THE CANDIDATES OF THE RULING PEOPLE'S NATIONAL MOVEMENT (PNM) WHO WILL BE FACING A FRAGMENTED OPPOSITION. NO SINGLE OPPOSITION PARTY HAS YET EMERGED AS THE PREEMINENT CHALLENGER TO THE INCUMBENTS AROUND WHICH A STOP-THE-PNM MOVEMENT COULD COALESCE AND CURRENT EXPECTATIONS ARE THAT THE DIVISION OF THE ANTI-PNM VOTE AMONG THE OPPOSITION PARTIES WILL BENEFIT THE PNM CONSIDERABLY. THE CAMPAIGN HAS NOTABLY FAILED TO EVOKE ANY KEY ISSUES OR THE PARTISAN ENTHUSIASM WHICH HAS TYPIFIED PREVIOUS ELECTIONS IN TRINIDAD. IN VIEW OF THIS APATHY, ONLY A MODERATE TURNOUT AT THE POLLS IS EXPECTED.

2. AT THIS STAGE, FIVE PARTIES APPEAR TO BE SERIOUS CONTENDERS EITHER TO FORM THE NEXT GOVERNMENT, BECOME THE FORMAL OPPOSITION, OR CONTRIBUTE TO A COLAITION GOVERNMENT. SINCE NO PUBLIC OPINION POLLS OF ANY SORT HAVE BEEN TAKEN, ANY ESTIMATE OF THE EVENTUAL OUTCOME INVOLVES A GREAT DEAL OF GUESS WORK AND HUNCH. WITH THAT CAVEAT, THE EMBASSY'S PRESENT EVALUATION FOLLOWS:

3. PEOPLE'S NATIONAL MOVEMENT - THE RULING PNM IS THE ODDS-ON FAVORITE TO WIN A COMFORTABLE MAJORITY OF THE SEATS IN THE HOUSE. DESPITE SOME INTRA-PARTY DISSENSION CAUSED BY THE PRIME MINISTER'S HIGH-HANDED PURGE OF SOME PARTY STALWARTS AND THE ACCUMULATED PROBLEMS OF 20 YEARS OF BEING IN POWER, THE PNM REMAINS THE BEST ORGANIZED PARTY WITH A POLITICAL LEADER OF DIMINISHED BUT STILL UNEQUALED CHARISMA. WHILE WIDESPREAD DISSATISFACTION WITH THE CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS UNQUESTIONALLY EXISTS IN MOST AREAS OF THE COUNTRY, THERE IS NOT A CONCOMITANT MOVEMENT TOWARD A SINGLE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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ALTERNATIVE PARTY. THE PNM HAS MADE EFFECTIVE USE OF ITS INCUMBANCY TO PROVIDE PATRONAGE JOBS AND TO PUBLICIZE ITS CANDIDATES AND ITS ACCOMPLISHMENTS. IT HAS RETAINED THE LOYALTY OF ITS HARD-CORE SUPPORTERS AMONG GOVERNMENT WORKERS, THE URBAN MIDDLE CLASS, AND THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY. ITS PROMISE OF "STABILITY" IS STILL A VOTE PULLER IN THIS SOCIETY.*

4. DEMOCRATIC LABOR PARTY - THE DLP, WHICH WAS "THE" OPPOSITION PARTY UNTIL 1971, HAS NOT RECOVERED FROM THE INTERNECINE WARFARE WHICH HAS DIVIDED THE PARTY SINCE 1972. ONCE SURE OF AT LEAST 12 SEATS IN THE PREDOMINANTLY EAST INDIAN AREAS OF CENTRAL AND SOUTH TRINIDAD, THE DLP IS NOW HARD PRESSED EVEN IN THESE AREAS BY A DISSIDENT FACTION OF THE PARTY LED BY VERNON JAMADAR AS WELL AS BY THE UNITED LABOR FRONT. THE FOUR SMALL PARUES WHICH JOINED THE DLP EARLIER THIS YEAR HAVE CONTRIBUTED SOME "NAME" CANDIDATES AND SEVERAL BLACK CANDIDATES TO HELP DISPEL THE PARTY'S IDENTIFICATION AS "THE INDIAN PARTY." THEY DID NOT, HOWEVER, BRING MUCH IN THE WAY OF DEMONSTRABLE PUBLIC SUPPORT OR OF DYNAMIC NEW FACES TO CHANGE THE DLP "OLBMSTAGER" IMAGE. AT THE PRESENT TIMEHWHE DLP HAS A REAL BATTLE JUST TO REGAIN ITS FORMER DOMINANCE WITHIN ITS FORMER STRONGHOLDS AND STANDS LITTLE CHANCE OF REMOVING THE PNM FROM WHITEHALL.

5. DEMOCRATIC ACTION CONGRESS - ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL SINCE IT BOYCOTTED THE 1971 ELECTIONS, THE DAC IS PLAINLY SUFFERING FROM FATIGUE. DESPITE ITS STRENUOUS EFFORTS, DAC HAS FAILED TO RALLY THE OPPOSITION OT ITS STANDARD OR TO ENLISH MANY PERSONS OF RESPECT IN THE COMMUNITY IN ITS CAUSE. A POSSIBLE COALITION WITH THE RADICAL UNITED LABOR FROXY, WHICH HOULD HAVE BROAAENED THE PJRTY'S APPEAL IN THE RURAL AREAS OF CENTRAL AND SOUTH TRINIDAD, FELL THROUGH IIN ITS FINAL STAGES. DAC SUPPORT IS STRONGEST IN THE POPULOUS NORTHERN CONSTITUE CIES AND TOBAGO, PRECISELY WHERE THE PNM IS ITSEEN BEST ORGANIZED. THE STRONLGLY MIDDLE-CLASS POPULATION IN THESE AREAS IS NOT EXPECTED TO FORSAKE THE STABILITY AND PROSPERITY IT HAS LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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ENJOYED UNDER THE PNM FOR THE UNSETTLING REFORMS OF ANR ROBINSON AND THE DAC. IN ROBINSON'S HOME ISLAND OF TOBAGO, WHERE DAC HAS SPENT A DISPROPORTINATE AMOUNT OF TIME AND MONEY, THE PNM IS EXPECTED TO WAGE A STRONG CAMPAIGN TO DENY THE DAC LEADER A SEAT IN PARLIAMENT BECAUSE OF HIS DEFECTION FROM THE PNM IN 1970.

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NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 AID-05

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6. TAPIA - THE UNIVERSITY/INTELLECTUAL ORIENTED TAPIA HOUSE MOVEMENT HAS PRESENTED A WELL-ORGANIZED AND WELL-REASONED PROGRAM, FIELDING A SLATE OF ARTICULATE, WELL-EDUCATED, YOUNG CANDIDATES, AND HAS EFFECTIVELY PUBLICIZED ITS CAMPAIGN THROUGH ITS NEWSPAPER AND STREETCORNER MEETINGS. IN DOING SO IT HAS WON THE APPROVAL OF MANY SERIOUS, WELL-EDUCATED VOTERS INCLUDING THE POLITICAL COMMUNIST OF THE DAILY "EXPRESS." TAPIA HAS NOT YET, HOWEVER, CONVERTED THE COMMON MAN TO ITS BRAND OF "UNCONVENTIONAL POLITICS" OR TRANSLATED THE BRILLIANCE OF ITS ORATORY AND WRITING INTO STRONG GRASS-ROOTS SUPPORT. TAPIA IS CONTESTING ONLY 29 OF THE 36 SEATS AND HAS MADE ITS STRONGEST EFFORTS IN THE PORT OF SPAIN AREA AND ALONG THE EASTERN CORRIDOR WHICH THE RULING PARTY HAS LONG DOMINATED. IN THE JUDGMENT OF MANY OBSERVERS, 1976 IS NOT THE YEAR FOR TAPIA BUT IT CLEARLY HOLDS PROMISE FOR THE FUTURE.

7. UNITED LABOR FRONT - THE MORE RADICAL ULF HAS VIRTUALLY
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NO CHANCE OF WINNING ENOUGH SEATS TO FORM A GOVERNMENT
SINCE IT IS CONTESTING ONLY 26 SEATS. IT ADMITS TO

THIS REALITY IN ITS ELECTION MANIFESTO BY CALLING FOR A COALITION GOVERNMENT WITH OTHER OPPOSITION PARTIES AND BY PROPOSING AT THIS LATE DATE A JOINT EFFORT BY THE OPPOSITION TO CONCENTRATE ITS SUPPORT BEHIND A SELECTED LIST OF THE NOMINATED OPPOSITION CANDIDATES. AS NOTED ABOVE, THE EFFORTS OF THE ULF TO BE THE MINOR PARTNER IN A COALITION WITH DAC FELL THROUGH EARLIER THIS YEAR. THE DEMONSTRATED SUPPORT OF THE ULF LIES ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY IN THE CANE FARMING AND SUGAR ESTATE AREAS AND IS DIRECTED PRIMARILY TOWARD THE EAST INDIAN LEADERS OF THE CANE FARMERS AND SUGAR WORKERS. ALTHOUGH THE OIL WORKERS UNION IS A STRONG SUPPORT OF THE FRONT AND HAS PROVIDED SIX CANDIDATES, THE UNION'S RANK AND FILE MEMBERS HAVE NOT COME OUT TO SUPPORT THE VENTURE OF ITS LEADERSHIP INTO POLITICS. THE OIL UNION'S PRESIDENT, GEORGE WEEKES, HAS RECOGNIZED THIS FACT AND HAS REFUSED TO BE A CANDIDATE HIMSELF. THE ULF'S ENTRY INTO THE RACE HAS, HOWEVER, FORCED MOST OF THE OTHER PARTIES, INCLUDING THE PNM, SOMEWHAT FURTHER TO THE LEFT THAN THEY MIGHT OTHERWISE HAVE BEEN. THE ULF HAS MADE IT POLITICALLY DIFFICULT FOR THE OTHER PARTIES TO DISCUSS SUCH IMPORTANT AND ONGOING CONCERNS AS COOPERATION WITH DEVELOPED COUNTRIES, JOINT VENTURES WITH MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS, AND LESS-THAN-FULL NATIONAL CONTROL OF THE ECONOMY AND NATURAL RESOURCES. THE OTHER OPPOSITION PARTIES WHOSE STRONGHOLDS ARE THREATENED BY ULF CANDIDATES HAVE VIGOROUSLY ATTACKED THE ULF AS A "DIRTY COMMUNIST PARTY" AND HAVE ACCUSED ULF LEADER BASDEO PANDAY OF NEGLIGENCE IN PROTECTING THE JOB SECURITY OF THE SUGAR WORKERS. THE BATTLE IN THESE AREAS IS CLEARLY BETWEEN RIVAL OPPOSITION PARTIES, WITH THE PNM THE POSSIBLE BENEFICIARY OF A FRAGMENTED OPPOSITION VOTE. THE ULF MAY WIN A FEW SEATS AND A PLACE IN PARLIAMENT TO PRESS FOR ITS PROGRAMS BUT IS NOT LIKELY TO BE A MAJOR FACTOR.

8. COMMENT: IN THE PAST, RACE HAS BEEN A MAJOR CONSIDERATION IN TRINIDAD POLITICS, WITH THE BLACK POPULATION SUPPORTING THE PNM AND THE EAST INDIANS THE DLP. THE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PROFUSION OF PARTIES IN THIS YEAR'S ELECTION AND THE AVOWEDLY MULTI-RACIAL CHARACTER OF MOST OF THE CONTESTING PARTIES HAS, HOWEVER, AT LEAST OBSCURED THE RACE ISSUE IF NOT DIMINISHED IT. RACIAL IDENTIFICATION OF CANDIDATES AND PARTIES IS NEVERTHELESS STILL A REALITY. LARGELY BLACK PARTIES SUCH AS THE PNM, TAPIA, AND DAC HAVE CONCENTRATED MOST OF THEIR FIREPOWER IN THE CONSTITUENCIES IN WHICH BLACKS PREDOMINATE. CONVERSELY, THE PARTIES DRAWING MOST OF THEIR MEMBERSHIP AND SUPPORT FROM THE

EAST INDIAN COMMUNITY, SUCH AS THE DLP, SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC LABOR PARTY, AND THE WEST INDIAN NATIONAL PARTY, HAVE PLACED THEIR BEST CANDIDATES IN PREDOMINANTLY EAST INDIAN AREAS. THE ULF HAS MADE AN ATTEMPT TO UNITE MEMBERS OF BOTH THE MAJOR RACES ALONG CLASS LINES, A STRATEGEM WHICH HAS NOT BEEN ACCOMPLISHED BEFORE. SINCE THIS ELECTION WILL BE THE FIRST FULLY CONTESTED NATIONAL ELECTION IN TEN YEARS, IT SHOULD OFFER SOME REVEALING INSIGHTS INTO THE PERSISTENCE OF RACIAL VOTING OR ABSENCE OF IT.

9. AT THIS JUNCTURE, TRINIDAD SEEMS PREPARED TO ACCEPT A CONTINUATION OF THE PNM GOVERNMENT AND TO KEEP PRIME MINISTER ERIC WILLIAMS IN WHITEHALL FOR ANOTHER FIVE YEARS. THERE HAS BEEN NO GROUND SWELL FOR CHANGE, PARTICULARLY NOT ALONG THE LINES OF JAMAICA OR GUYANA. THE SUPPORT FOR THE PNM, HOWEVER, IS CERTAINLY NEITHER UNANIMOUS OR ENTHUSIASTIC AND STEMS AT LEAST PARTIALLY FROM THE LACK OF A CLEAR AND ACCEPTABLE ALTERNATIVE. A POSITIVE RESULT OF THE ELECTION SHOULD BE THE RETURN OF AN EFFECTIVE OPPOSITION TO PARLIAMENT. SUCH AN OPPOSITION HAS BEEN SADLY MISSED BOTH BY THE CITIZENS AND BY THE GOVERNMENT ITSELF. FURTHERMORE, SUCH A PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION MAY WELL PROVIDE THE NUCLEUS FOR A COALITION WHICH WOULD UNSEAT A TIRED PNM IN THE NEXT ELECTION.

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